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SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR SA/INS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM KCRM KIRF SOCI CASC IN

SUBJECT: CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS LEADERS CONCERNED BY MISSIONARY MURDER  
CASE IN ORISSA

1. (SBU) Summary: During CG's August 23-25 visit to Orissa, he met with Christian representatives to discuss developments in the January 1999 murder case of Australian Christian evangelist Graham Staines and his two sons. CG also inquired about communal relations in the State. The Christian representatives expressed frustration with legislation that made evangelizing and conversions difficult, such as the Orissa Freedom of Religion Act (OFRA), which requires converts to register with district authorities prior to conversion. The representatives also objected to the legal provisions that resulted in scheduled caste Dalits converting to Christianity losing their protected status and government preferences. The Christian leaders felt that communal relations had improved in the last few months, engendered by the more tolerant views of the national governing United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition and a reduction in Christian evangelizing. The reduction in tensions being partly attributable to the lessened evangelizing reflects that in general, religious communities in Orissa co-exist peacefully, but that conversion efforts can spark violence. End Summary.

2. (SBU) On August 25, CG met with President of the Orissa chapter of the All India Christian Council Reverend P.R. Parichha, General Secretary of the Orissa United Christian Forum B.K. Muduli and High Court Lawyer Pratap Chhinchani to discuss recent developments in the murder case of Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two minor sons. Staines ran a leprosy home in Orissa. On January 22, 1999 in Manoharpur, Staines and his sons were burnt to death when the vehicle they were sleeping in was set on fire by a mob, reportedly upset with Staines' evangelizing in the area.

3. (U) A year later, police arrested principal suspect Dara Singh and 12 others, with links to rightwing Hindu groups. A Sessions Court sentenced Singh to death and 11 others to life imprisonment. However on May 19, 2005, the Orissa High Court converted Singh's death sentence to life imprisonment and acquitted the other 11. The High Court held that there was no evidence or record to show that Singh's individual act alone killed Staines and his sons. On August 16, Singh challenged his conviction and appealed to the Supreme Court. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) also appealed to the Supreme Court on August 29, challenging the High Court's judgment reducing Singh's conviction to life imprisonment and urging re-imposition of the Sessions Court's capital punishment sentence.

4. (SBU) Parichha, Muduli and Chhinchani were concerned with the developments in the Singh case. They stated that the reduction of Singh's punishment to a life sentence was not justified, because the available evidence indicated he was involved in the crime. They also felt that the death sentence was important as a deterrent to other Hindu fundamentalists.

5. (SBU) In addition to developments in the Staines case, the Christian representatives were also dissatisfied with the OFRA or "anti-conversion law" as they characterized it. The law requires converts to a religion to register with district authorities prior to their conversion. The Christian representatives felt that this exposed converts to pressure and reprisals from Hindu fundamentalists, like members of the Bajrang Dal and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. As an example, they mentioned that in May more than 500 Christian tribal converts had been "reconverted" to Hinduism in Bargarh district. Echoing these comments, a week later the "The Asian Age" newspaper reported that on September 4 police in Kendrapara district arrested two people for assaulting and forcibly tonsuring 10 Dalits who had converted to Christianity the previous year.

6. (SBU) The Christian representatives saw the fact that Hindu Dalit converts to Christianity lost their protected status and various preferences under the legal system as another discriminatory issue. The GOI has a program of affirmative action and preferences for Dalits or scheduled castes that historically faced extreme discrimination. However when the Dalits convert to Christianity, these preferences would be lost. The Christian leaders noted that Dalit converts to other religions such as Sikhism or Buddhism would not lose these advantages; therefore, creating a disincentive for conversion to Christianity. The Dalits and tribal communities, marginalized

from mainstream culture and economic opportunities, have been the focus of Christian evangelical efforts.

17. (SBU) On a positive note, the three contacts believed that communal tensions in Orissa have been less in recent months. They felt that the improved situation was partly attributable to the recently elected national UPA coalition which was more sensitive to communal issues and that this had helped to minimize conflicts, even at the State level. They also noted that Christian groups had reduced their level of evangelizing, which meant fewer reprisals by Hindu fundamentalists.

18. (SBU) Comment: The Staines murder demonstrated how religious tensions in Orissa's poor rural areas can explode into violence. Evangelizing in these areas serves to spark the tinder of resentment felt by Hindu fundamentalists and groups like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bajrang Dal. These groups then attempt to counter the efforts of the Christian evangelists as evidenced by the regularly reported incidents of harassment and intimidation against converts. The Christian evangelists approach of targeting the disenfranchised Dalits and tribal communities places them in more remote areas and sometimes away from the protections of law enforcement. The Christian representatives conceded that overall, religious communities in Orissa co-exist without violence. However, religious conflict arises when Christians attempt to evangelize in the communities in Orissa's geographic and social "Outback."

JARDINE